



VOICES (VOCES) INITIATIVE

Protecting, Defending, and Promoting Civic Space in Central America

When civil society is free to flourish, governments are more accountable—and thus they perform better. Citizens are more invested in their communities, and problems big and small are more likely to get solved. In some countries in Central America, civic space is under threat due to the action of governments, private actors, and/or criminal networks that deploy a variety of tools and tactics to consolidate their authority—and silence individuals and organizations committed to democracy and improving the lives of citizens.

A RESPONSE TO CONTRACTING CIVIC SPACE

This contraction of civic space is propelled by the following: the enactment of repressive or ambiguous laws impacting the operations of civil society organizations; the erosion of judicial independence; limitations on access to public information; electoral fraud and manipulation; criminalization and spurious civil litigation; smear campaigns; violence and intimidation; and online disinformation and misinformation.

On June 8, 2022, USAID Administrator Samantha Power [announced](#) the launch of the interagency Voices (Voces) initiative. The initiative brings together all of the U.S. government's tools—public and private diplomacy, foreign assistance programming, and enforcement authorities, among other elements—to protect, defend, and promote civic space in Central America.

The Voices initiative includes a focus on the following:

- Promoting digital democracy and countering digital authoritarianism.
- Promoting freedom of expression and strengthening independent media.
- Countering criminalization and providing protections for those who are targeted.

The Voices initiative is in support of the Biden-Harris Administration's [U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America](#) by preserving space for citizens to contribute to their own communities and insist that their leaders serve the public good.

Through this initiative, USAID is working alongside like-minded partners—in government, the international community, civil society, the private sector, and beyond—to advocate for adherence to international human rights obligations, such as freedom of expression and association.

CIVIL SOCIETY IS AN ESSENTIAL ENGINE OF DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT

USAID views civil society and other private actors—non-governmental organizations, journalists, universities, faith groups, labor unions, community organizations, business entities—as essential building blocks of democracy and development.

A diverse civil society is essential to a healthy society because it:

- Informs citizens.
- Monitors government policies and actions.
- Holds government actors accountable.
- Advocates.
- Pushes for better policies.
- Defends rights.
- Delivers essential services—especially to marginalized populations who too often face high barriers to access.

Through the Voices initiative, the U.S. government will seek opportunities for further coordination and collaboration with partners that show a commitment to defending and promoting a vibrant civil society's essential role in advancing democracy, peace, prosperity, and human dignity throughout Central America.

**To learn more about the Voices initiative,
please contact:
LACOutreach@usaid.gov**

EMPOWERING INDEPENDENT MEDIA

Since the launch of both the Root Causes Strategy and the Voices initiative, USAID has strengthened and expanded programming dedicated to core democracy, human rights, and governance issues.

For example, USAID reincorporated El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras into the Promoting Security and Freedom of Expression for Media (PROSAFE) activity.

PROSAFE supports safe investigative journalism in countries where the media experience government pressure/censorship, intimidation, and violence from transnational criminal organizations and corrupt actors.

Participating journalists have produced more than 150 impact investigative pieces on environmental issues, corruption, and money laundering, jointly uncovering hundreds of millions of dollars in mismanaged public funding.